

Membership Schemes

Building a sustainable community of supporters

Having a Membership scheme can be a way of building strong, long-lasting support for your group or organisation. Members usually pay an annual fee or give an annual suggested donation in return for being part of a community and receiving specific benefits. Read our guidance below to help you decide whether a Membership scheme is right for your group or organisation.

1) Pros and Cons of a Membership scheme

Pros: A Membership scheme is a sustainable income source as Members usually stick around for years, paying or donating an annual amount.

This income is unrestricted. You can use it towards your running costs or other aspects of your work. You can also build a community of passionate and loyal supporters who may help you in other ways e.g., volunteering, advocating for you, being available for consultations, and recruiting more supporters.

Cons: Members usually expect something in return. They want to feel like part of a close community – invited to events, receiving regular news, being involved in service design, consulted about your campaigns or services, the opportunity to share their stories, being thanked publicly in your Annual Reviews etc. Members may expect special previews or discounted bookings. However, it's a fine line – supporters also don't want to see wasted time, materials or benefits they won't use.

A Membership scheme may be best suited to groups who already have a community of people involved in their work, who come together regularly to volunteer, attend groups or events etc. You could convert some of this existing community to Members by inviting them to pay / donate an annual amount. If you don't have this type of community already, it can be time-consuming to build from scratch.

Like all fundraising methods, a Membership scheme takes time to create and administer. Weigh up your fundraising priorities carefully: Do you want to build a community of supporters? Do you want more volunteers? More people attending your existing groups and events? Or do you just want to bring in income, while not needing your supporters to get involved in other ways? If just the latter, a Membership scheme may not be appropriate for you.

Be aware that you can cause confusion if you're inviting individuals to give money in multiple ways e.g., Membership, monthly direct debits, crowdfunding, events... It's best to start with one or two methods for individual giving. It's also good to have clear, distinct marketing copy for each method, even if you're targeting the same audience.

Also, be aware that the role of a supporter Member might easily be confused if you have non-paying, voting members as part of your legal structure / constitution. In this case, you may want to call them Friends instead of Members. If you're inviting service-users to sign up, there may also be some blurring of roles and expectations there too.

2) Financial planning

If you've got this far, the next step is to decide on your Membership fee or donation and consider how many Members you'll need to make a scheme viable. Have a look at the fee / donation structures that other organisations use.

And consider your costs – are you using paid staff to administer the scheme? Will you need to pay for marketing materials? The cost of holding Member events? Membership will only be an effective fundraising method if you make a profit – and it can take several years to build up to the required number of Members to see a good return.

Depending on your legal structure, there may be tax implications associated with your scheme e.g., whether you charge a fee or ask for a suggested donation, offer benefits with a financial value, and whether you can claim GiftAid.

3) Tailor your scheme

Once you've worked out the finances, consider your market - the people you're targeting as Members. You could consider their age range, social status, level of wealth, existing involvement with your group etc. This will help you to set your Membership fee / suggested annual donation and to tailor your Membership package and marketing accordingly.

Consider potential Members' interests and lifestyles. Put yourself in their shoes and ask, 'Why would they want to join?'. For the sense of belonging and a shared identity? For the perks you're offering in your Membership package. Assuming they care about your cause, why would they want to become a Member rather than just regularly donate?

It's advisable to consult your existing community or other people in your target market about the benefits they'd like from Membership – and whether they'd even want to join – before you make final decisions.

You could offer several different types of Membership if you have different audiences in mind e.g., a Membership level for service-users and / or volunteers who also want to support your work financially; specific Business Membership that provides benefits to the leaders or staff of a business; a professional Membership for those with a professional interest in your work... Have a look at other organisations – particularly larger national charities – to get ideas.

4) Promoting your scheme and signing up Members

Now it's time to publicise your scheme. Again, consider where your target market is most likely to see the info – social media, your e-news, your website, leaflets in local businesses or other places, your groups, and events...

Can you post on other e-lists or social media groups that you're part of? Will local businesses share your info on their site and in e-news – particularly if they have signed up as a Business Member?

Make it easy for people to sign up and easy for yourselves. Is the information short and clear? Do you have an easy one-step sign-up form on your website? Can they pay their fee / make a donation at the same time as signing up, or will you follow up later?

Will you ask people to complete and email a form back to you with their payment details? Or to post the form to you with a cheque? Can they spread their Membership cost over the year? Can they give you permission to auto-renew, or will you contact them each year?

5) Retaining your Members

Strengthening your relationship with Members is the key to keeping them on board. Most importantly, you'll need to follow through on the benefits you promised when Members signed up and give them great 'customer service' at all times.

Keep in touch with them with regular newsletters and invitations to participate. It's nice to surprise them once in a while – invite them to a special event e.g., a coffee morning where they can hear stories from your service-users, or a drinks evening where they can Meet the Trustees and volunteers/staff. You may get additional donations as a result.

It's also important to listen to your Members and find out what they want. You could do an annual survey of Members plus a survey of lapsed Members (those who don't renew) in order to get new ideas and improve your scheme. You could ask your Trustees to call Members and ask for their views.